

# *Reading Horizons*

---

Volume 36, Issue 2

1995

Article 5

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1995

---

## A Comparison of Young Children's Writing Products in Skills-Based and Whole Language Classrooms

Penny A. Freppon\*

Ellen McIntyre†

Karin L. Dahl‡

\*University of Cincinnati

†University of Cincinnati

‡University of Cincinnati

Copyright ©1995 by the authors. *Reading Horizons* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). [http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)

# A Comparison of Young Children's Writing Products in Skills-Based and Whole Language Classrooms

Penny A. Freppon, Ellen McIntyre, and Karin L. Dahl

## **Abstract**

Whole language instruction and an emphasis on the writing process have had a significant impact on the teaching of writing. Many whole language teachers are already in practice, and more educators are moving toward this kind of teaching. However, comparative research on the value of whole language curriculum is limited. It is important to study children's interpretations (Erickson and Shultz, 1992) as they are reflected in the written products they generate in different kinds of classrooms. We need to know more about the sense children make of their instruction, what they are learning about written language, and the kinds of writing they produce. The purpose of this article is to report on a two-year, descriptive study of eight, low-income children's writing in skills-based and whole language instruction during kindergarten and first grade. Our focus was on the development of emergent writers in these two different kinds of instruction.



# A Comparison of Young Children's Writing Products in Skills-Based and Whole Language Classrooms

Penny A. Freppon  
Ellen McIntyre  
Karin L. Dahl

Whole language instruction and an emphasis on the writing process have had a significant impact on the teaching of writing. Many whole language teachers are already in practice, and more educators are moving toward this kind of teaching. However, comparative research on the value of whole language curriculum is limited. It is important to study children's interpretations (Erickson and Shultz, 1992) as they are reflected in the written products they generate in different kinds of classrooms. We need to know more about the sense children make of their instruction, what they are learning about written language, and the kinds of writing they produce. The purpose of this article is to report on a two-year, descriptive study of eight, low-income children's writing in skills-based and whole language instruction during kindergarten and first grade. Our focus was on the development of emergent writers in these two different kinds of instruction.

The eight focal children came from a larger group of randomly selected children in four kindergarten skills-based classrooms and four kindergarten whole language classrooms.

In each classroom, using researchers' judgment, actual writing artifacts, and pre- and post test information, we studied a more proficient learner and a less proficient learner. Thus, across a range of writing knowledge and skills, we analyzed the ways these children structured their texts and the topics they wrote about in these two instruction settings.

Following a brief review of the literature on children's writing development and studies comparing skills-based and whole language instruction, we provide a summary description of the classrooms and the research procedures. We conclude this article with the results and a discussion of instructional implications.

As children emerge as writers, they construct knowledge about print, the language of various texts, and the forms and functions texts take. Well-read-to children also acquire a schema that differentiates written language from oral language (Purcell-Gates, 1988) and learners gradually discover the conventions that guide and organize texts (Clay, 1979). Children's early drawings, scribbles, letter strings, invented spellings, copying and labeling are natural and important aspects of becoming conventionally literate (Clay, 1979; Daiute, 1990; Read, 1971; Sulzby, 1985, 1992). Indeed, Dyson (1989, 1991) holds that writing development involves more than the move toward decontextualized conventional forms. Her work suggests that audience, text, genre, and the sociocultural context in which the writing takes place all influence what and how children write. It is unclear, however, if children with similar socioeconomic background and written language knowledge write differently in contrasting writing programs during the first two years in school. This investigation addresses that issue.

Newkirk (1989) found that children's writing differed in form and complexity according to context. For example, children in his research were able to write beginning persuasive and analytic texts when provided with holistic support and rich literate environments. While Newkirk's study involved middle-class children's writing in and out of school, and his own daughter at home, the present study focuses on low-income children's text structures and topics as they wrote in urban classrooms.

### **Skills-based and whole language research**

Thus far comparative research shows somewhat mixed results. One study with children from skills-based and whole language classrooms indicates that learners with similar academic proficiencies acquired alphabetic knowledge equally well in both settings (McIntyre and Freppon, 1994). Dahl and Freppon (1995) found that children who experienced the first two years of school in whole language classrooms showed more literate behaviors than a skills-based comparative group. In addition, Freppon's (1991) study of children's concepts of the nature and purpose of reading in these two different kinds of instruction show that the children from literature-based first grades held more of a meaning-based view and used their phonic skills with greater success. Some research has found little difference, however, in writing achievement of young children in contrasting curricula (Haggerty, Hiebert, and Owens, 1989; Stahl, Suttles, and Pagnucco, 1992). For example, based on single sample data, Stahl et al. (1992) indicated that children's reading ability, rather than instruction, correlated with their writing achievement. In contrast, Varble (1990) found that second-graders with one year of whole language instruction wrote better (in both quality of content and writing mechanics) than second graders in traditional instruction. However, this same study also compared sixth graders with one year of whole

language instruction to sixth graders in traditional curriculum. Those sixth grade results showed no statistically greater ratings for either group.

The current study provides additional comparative research information on children's writing. Results are based on long-term study and are of interest not only to researchers, but also to teachers, administrators, and parents. The study's questions were: 1) What text structures do low-income, emergent writers produce in kindergarten and first grade? 2) On what topics do these children write? and 3) What if any effects do these contrasting kinds of instruction have on their writing products?

### **Research sites and procedures**

This research, which builds on two larger studies, Purcell-Gates and Dahl (1991) and Dahl and Freppon (1995) was conducted in three midwestern cities. According to the community and demographic records, each school had a majority of low-income children. Participating teachers' instructional perspectives and practices were identified as skills-based or whole language through consistent results on several data sources.

The skills-based writing programs met the descriptions detailed in other studies of similar classrooms (DeFord, 1984; Durkin, 1978-1979; Knapp and Shields, 1990). This instruction emphasized accuracy, writing mechanics, and neatness. Desired learning outcomes were to take place through writing practice which was to be completed regularly. Typical kindergarten writing involved worksheet activities such as writing an F for a picture fox and identifying whole words that corresponded to pictures. On a typical day in the skills-based first grades, the children's writing included copying and/or completing sentences and adding illustrations. In essence, the

most critical instructional components were: 1) teacher prescribed writing activities, 2) children's independent completion of these writing activities, and 3) children's progression through a scope and sequence of writing skills.

The whole language writing programs in this study met the descriptions detailed in other studies (Allen and Mason, 1989; Edelsky, Altwerger, and Flores, 1991; Graves, 1983). Desired learning outcomes were to take place through meaningful and functional writing interactions. Instruction emphasized the writing process and skills such as syntax. Writing mechanics were often discussed and demonstrated. Typical kindergarten writing included journal writing in which children either responded to a prompt, or generated writings on self-selected topics. On a typical day in the whole language first grades, the children's writing involved self-selected topics. In essence the most critical instructional components were: 1) blocks of time for writing activities, 2) children writing collaboratively and independently, and 3) implementation of writing workshop routines with extensive use of children's literature.

In spite of the differences in the skills-based and whole language writing programs, children in both settings engaged in comparable writing episodes. In kindergarten, and especially in first grade, all these focal learners actually composed. That is, they attempted to generate some meaning that was original and represented that meaning (at least in part) with written language. To study their writing in these composing episodes we relied on data gathered during twice-weekly classroom observations using remote microphones (which captured talk surrounding writing) and field notes. The point was to analyze the writing these eight focal learners produced in the act of composition.

Table 1  
*Text Structures by Category and Description*

<u>Category Name</u>	<u>Description</u>
Letter Strings	Letters and letter-like forms grouped together, other marks may be included.
Drawings	Drawing carries primary meaning, writing included. Drawing adds to or elaborates meaning.
Labels	Labels written or drawn using writing in any form.
Lists	Writing is organized in list fashion.
Narrative-like List	Writing has both narrative and list qualities, e.g., <i>I like pizza, I like tacos, ...</i>
Genre	Writing is organized in letter, card or other formalized structure, e.g., <i>Dear Santa ...</i>
Declarative Statement	Writing is structured in a statement, e.g., <i>You are a good baseball player.</i>
Spin-off Stories	Writing directly tied to a known story and includes book text and some original text by child.
Narrative Prose/ Initial Paragraph	Writing is focused on a category or topic and consists of an assertion and related sentence, e.g., <i>My brother is fun. He always plays with me.</i> Clusters of sentences or clauses are related.
Story-like/Story	Writing is organized in story form, e.g., it has episodic structure, conflict. It may be also transitional and combine story features such as formulaic title/ending with elaborated narrative-like lists and a sequence of events.



In this analysis, Newkirk's (1989) work on children's writing development was of great value and many of his terms were used to label text structures. Table One describes these structures. The categories are listed in order of complexity as suggested by Newkirk (1989) and others (Clay, 1979; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982) and by the order in which the data emerged over the course of the study.

To conduct the analysis and reflect the non-linearity of writing development, we identified the ways these children organized their writing (text structures) and what they wrote about (topics) through repeated review (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). After establishing tentative categories we constructed grids that tracked and described the children's writing over time, wrote summaries of our findings, organized data into the first half and second half of both school years, and refined the categories. Finally, we compared across focal learners in skills-based and whole language classrooms.

## Results

Results showed both similarities and differences between these two groups of focal learners with the whole language children writing more and having greater breadth in the kinds of writing they produced.

Similarities. The groups were similar in that seven text structures, letter strings, drawing and writing, labeling, lists, narrative prose/initial paragraphs, genre writing, and declarative statements were found in the writings of all the focal children. Another similarity between groups was in the general developmental changes over the two year period with most letter strings, drawing and writing, labeling, and lists occurring in kindergarten.

Examples of the predominant, similar first-grade findings are presented below. Samples represent the kind of declarative statements, narrative prose/initial paragraphs, and genre writing produced in both curricula. In these and all other samples, nearly all invented spellings and punctuation are original, however, some standard spellings have been added for clarity.

Skills-based instruction

*My name is Mark.*

*I lik my mom.*

*I won't just stand tehe.*

*I wod run awae. With who ever  
windmill.*

*is with me.*

*Dear Chris*

*I like your songs*

*Will you come to my house*

Whole language instruction

*I lik basbal.*

*I lov Jon.*

*Chucky cheese is fun. I like to play  
in the balls. I got a chucky cheese*

*Dear Angela*

*I love my roses published book.*

*I am proud of myslef. So is mom.*

Differences across instruction. As noted above, focal children from skills-based and whole language classrooms were similar in some of the ways they structured their texts. However, the majority of skills-based, focal children continued to produce only declarative sentences throughout first

grade. There was one first-grade exception with a proficient learner producing narrative prose/initial paragraph writing. In contrast, spin-off story, and story-like/story writing were found only in the whole language group. These children also wrote fewer declarative statements in first grade. Regardless of proficiency, all first-grade, focal learners from the whole language classrooms produced narrative prose/initial paragraphs. Two of these samples are show below.

*We all went to Mrs. W class and we got on a RasB  
It wes fun. My tentheer said I am going to fall of then...*

*Mrs. S. I want to see Simon I like the name. I theet  
my mom you hed a bab.*

Examples of the spin-off story, and story-like/story writing found only in the whole language group follow.

*I played house all by mysaiif. I was alone becaus my  
coin (cousin) would not play with me. I told her  
mommy and daddy. I haded (hated) my coin because  
anytime I go over her house I play withe her. But any-  
time she come over my house she do not like to play  
with me. (Story-like/story)*

*When Willie hed a her kete (When Willie had a  
hair cut) When I hed a her Kete... (When I had a hair  
cut) Dad sam "No" to me Mom sam "No" to me  
Antie said "YES" (spin-off story)*

The whole language learners produced relatively complex writing across the range of 10 text structures. These children also wrote more than the skills-based group. However, there were whole language within-group differences which varied according to individual development in learning to write. For example, more proficient learners moved into

more complex writing sooner. Two of these children produced some narrative prose and genre writing even before first grade as these examples shown.

*i kc on to m s R P*  
*(I can't wait until my slumber party)*  
*T Gt PK G*  
*(We get to play games)*  
*DeaR Helen Jane*  
*Ut Ukt M BR PE*  
*(you come to my birthday party)*

In the whole language kindergartens the less proficient children primarily organized their writings through drawing, letters, and combinations of these structures. However, in contrast to less proficient, skills-based learners their writing had more breadth.

Table Two summarizes the findings on text structures produced during kindergarten and first grade in the two different kinds of instruction. Text structures are shown in general patterns of developmental order (Clay, 1979).

In summary, results indicated that both classroom instruction and individual development in learning affected these children's writing products. For example, focal children from the whole language classrooms wrote more texts and produced structures not evident in the skills-based classrooms. Generally, however, the more proficient learners in both kinds of instruction produced more writings and more complex texts than their less proficient peers.

Interestingly, the category of spin-off stories emerged only in one whole language first grade. This kind of writing first occurred after a storybook reading session when the teacher suggested that children might write a story similar to

the one they had just heard. In this classroom, spin-off stories seemed to become an option that children often chose. In the other whole language first grade, which had more structured workshop routines (e.g., students produced ideas sheets, wrote a series of several drafts, and chose one piece to be published), learners produced more initial paragraphs and narrative prose, genre writing, and story-like pieces. Thus, it appeared that differences between whole language classroom programs also influenced some kinds of writing.

Table 2  
*Text Structures and Number of Writing  
Products Produced in Kindergarten and First Grade*

Instruction	Skills-Based	Whole Language
Composing Events	20	44
Text Characteristics	Number of Texts	Number of Texts
Letter Strings	2	5
Drawing and Writing	2	6
Labels	2	3
Lists	3	4
Narrative-like Lists	0	5
Narrative Prose/ Initial Paragraphs	3	5
Genre	2	4
Declarative Statements	9	3
Spin-off Story	0	3
Story-like/Story	0	8

-----  
\* In both curricula, discrepancies in the total number of texts and total number of composing events result from children's production of more than one text in a given composing event.

As noted earlier, we examined the topics on which these eight focal children wrote. Interestingly, these findings showed similarities and differences also. Identified topics

showed that children in both curricula wrote about things such as family, friends, and personal experiences. Names of parents and other family members were listed and used to label drawings. Mom played a focal role in many texts. However, children from whole language classrooms differed in that they wrote about a wider range of topics. For example, these children also wrote about their school experiences, teachers, and things for which they wished and hoped.

### **Discussion and instructional implications**

Across the two year period children of varying proficiency exhibited emergent to conventional forms of writing described by other researchers (Sulzby, 1992). This indicated that, regardless of instruction, learning development has a strong influence on young children's writing. However, differences between children in the contrasting curricula also help confirm Newkirk's (1989) and Dyson's (1989, 1991) research. Classroom writing programs, their contexts, and the complexities related to audience, social structure, and texts read, strongly affect children's writing. All focal learners participating in this investigation were similar in age, socioeconomic status, and in beginning writing knowledge. Both focal groups consisted of the same number of more and less proficient learners. Yet, the focal children receiving whole language instruction produced more writing of greater complexity. This finding is important since it is through such early writing experiences that children are believed to learn to write the persuasive and analytical texts needed in the upper grades (Newkirk, 1989). Moreover, children interpret their instruction personally, and rich writing experiences help children learn to see themselves as writers (Dahl and Freppon, 1995; Freppon in press).

Evidence in the study suggests that students at the "top" do well in whole language instruction in the early grades, and

for the less proficient learners, the whole language curriculum appeared to provide more support. It also suggests that some children are able to make sense of what it takes to write even when the focus of instruction is not on the writing process.

The findings reported here indicate that whole language or literature-based writing programs that explicitly teach the writing process and writing skills can make a difference for low-income children with a range of proficiencies including those "we worry most about" (Allen and Mason, 1989). For teachers interested in implementing the kind of whole language, first-grade writing programs involved in this study, the classic work of Donald Graves (1983) is recommended. In addition, there is detailed information on how to begin and sustain such writing instruction with low-income, first graders in a recent article by Headings and Freppon (1994). Simply, reading high quality children's literature aloud, discussing it, and inviting children to respond by writing about the stories (formulating a new ending or describing their favorite part) or characters provides an excellent way to begin. However, grading or assessing young children's writing must be handled with care (See Goodman, Goodman, and Hood, 1989; Harp, 1991). In addition, explicit instruction on how to write is often needed and should occur along with a positive focus which builds on what the child is trying to accomplish (Carroll, Wilson, and Au in press, Dudley-Marling, in press, Purcell-Gates, in press). Individual, peer group, and whole group instruction is supported through writing demonstration (in which teachers talk about their thinking as they write), and reading good writing (from both professional and student authors) and pointing out its qualities.

## Limitations

This study is limited in several ways. Although rich in data collected over a two year period during focal children's composing events, this investigation lacks a study of writing mechanics, spelling, and other literary skills such as audience awareness. Findings are restricted to kindergarteners and first graders of similar socioeconomic backgrounds general reading and writing abilities, and curricular experiences. The study was conducted with full knowledge that every instructional setting imposes limits on children's responses and that these classrooms exemplified skills-based and whole language instruction. This report documented what occurred in particular instances, not what the children might have written under other circumstances.

## References

- Allen, J. & Mason, J. (1989). *Risk takers, risk makers, risk breakers*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Carroll, J. H., Wilson, R. A. & Au, K. H. (in press). Explicit instruction in the context of the readers' and writers' workshop. In E. McIntyre & M. Pressley (Eds.), *Balancing teaching: Skills & strategies in elementary whole language contexts*. Norwood MA: Christopher Gordon.
- Clay, M. M. (1979). *What did I write?* Auckland: Heinemann.
- Dahl, K. L. & Freppon, P. A. (1995). A comparison of inner-city children's interpretations of reading and writing instruction in the early grades in skills-based and whole language classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 30, 50-74.
- Daiute, C. (1990). The role of play in writing development. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 24, 4-47.
- DeFord, D. E. (1984). Classroom context for literacy learning. In T. E. Raphael (Ed.), *The contexts of school based literacy* (pp. 163-182). NY: Random House.
- Dudley-Marling, C. (in press). Direct instruction within a whole language framework: Teaching struggling readers and writers. In E. McIntyre & M. Pressley (Eds.), *Balancing teaching: Skills & strategies in elementary whole language contexts*. Norwood MA: Christopher Gordon.
- Durkin, D. (1978-1979). What classroom observations reveal about reading comprehension instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 14, 481-553.
- Dyson, A. H. (1989). *Multiple worlds of child writers: Friends learning to write*. NY: Teacher's College Press.



- Dyson, A. H. (1991, February). Viewpoints: The word and the world – reconceptualizing written language development or do rainbows mean a lot to little girls? *Research in the Teaching of English*, 25, 97-123.
- Edelsky, C., Altwerger, D., & Flores, B. (1991). Whole language: What's new? In C. Edelsky (Ed.), *With literacy and justice for all: Rethinking the social in language and education*, (pp. 96-111). NY: Falmer Press.
- Erickson, F., & Shultz, J. (1992). Students' experience of the curriculum. In P. W. Jackson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on curriculum*, (pp. 465-485). NY: Macmillan.
- Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky, A. (1982). *Literacy before schooling*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Freppon, P. A. (in press). Low-income children's literacy interpretations in a skills-based and a whole language classroom. *Journal of Literacy Research* (Formerly JRB).
- Freppon, P. A. (1991). An investigation of children's concepts of the purpose and nature of reading in different instructional settings. *The Journal of Reading Behavior: A Journal of Literacy*, 23, 139-163.
- Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. D. (1984). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. NY: Academic Press.
- Goodman, K. S., Goodman, Y. M., & Hood, W. J. (1989). *The whole language evaluation book*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Graves, D. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Haggerty, P. J., Hiebert, E. H., & Owens, M. K. (1989). Students' comprehension, writing, and perceptions in two approaches to literacy instruction. In S. McCormick & J. Zutell (Eds.), *Cognitive and social perspective for literacy research and instruction* (pp. 453-459). Thirty-eighth year-book of the National Reading Conference. Chicago IL: National Reading Conference.
- Harp, B. (1991). *Assessment and evaluation in whole language programs*. Norwood MA: Christopher Gordon.
- Headings, L., & Freppon, P. A. (1994). Taking the risk out of writing: Designing and implementing a program for low-SES children in a whole language first grade. *The Ohio Reading Teacher*, 28, 6-14.
- Knapp, M. S., & Shields, P. M. (1990). Reconcepting academic instruction for children of poverty. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 71, 752-758.
- McIntyre, E., & Freppon, P. A. (1994). Children's development of alphabetic knowledge in a skills-based classroom and a whole language classroom. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 28, 391-417.
- Newkirk, T. (1989). *More than stories, the range of children's writing*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.

- Purcell-Gates, V. (in press). Process teaching with direct instruction and feedback in a university-based clinic. In E. McIntyre and M. Pressley (Eds.), *Balancing teaching: Skills and strategies in elementary whole language contexts*. Norwood MA: Christopher Gordon.
- Purcell-Gates, V. (1988). Written language knowledge held by low-SES, inner-city children entering kindergarten. In S. McCormick & J. Zutell (Eds.), *Cognitive and social perspective for literacy research and instruction* (pp. 95-105). Thirty-ninth yearbook of the National Reading Conference. Chicago IL: National Reading Conference.
- Purcell-Gates, V., & Dahl, K. L. (1991). Low-SES children's success and failure at early literacy in skills-based classrooms. *Journal of Reading Behavior: A Journal of Literacy*, 23, 1-34.
- Read, C. (1971). Pre-school children's knowledge of English phonology. *Harvard Educational Review*, 41, 1-34.
- Stahl, S., Suttles, C. W., & Pagnucco, J. R. (1992, April). *The effects of traditional and process literacy instruction on first graders' reading and writing achievement and orientation toward reading*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Sulzby, E. (1985). Kindergarteners as writers and readers. In M. Farr (Ed.), *Advances in writing research: Children's early writing development*. Norwood NJ: Ablex.
- Sulzby, E. (1992). Transitions from emergent to conventional writing. *Language Arts*, 69, 290-297.
- Varble, M. L. (1990). Analysis of writing samples of students taught by teachers using whole language vs. traditional approaches. *Journal of Educational Research*, 83, 245-252.

*Penny A. Freppon, Ellen McIntyre, and Karin L. Dahl are faculty members in the Division of Teacher Education at the University of Cincinnati, in Cincinnati Ohio.*